

Between The Lines

From beans to jeans and headgear to hardware, most everyday items bear a Universal Product Code (UPC). This symbol — a series of numbers and vertical bars of varying thicknesses — is shorthand for product information. When a cashier passes this UPC symbol over an electronic scanner, a computer identifies the symbol and sends a pre-programmed price to the check-out register. That price appears on a display screen and on your printed receipt.

Scanner technology has several advantages: speeding check-out time, lowering labor costs, and improving sales and inventory records. Scanning results in fewer pricing errors than manual entry and using individual price stickers.

Studies show that scanning errors can result in both overcharges and undercharges. Overcharges, however, cost the individual shopper money, especially if the shopper doesn't watch prices at the register during check-out and fails to speak up when they occur.

Savvy consumers are those who are aware of prices and who routinely watch and check the scanner charges for the items they buy. They are willing to complain about errors, shop elsewhere if price corrections are not promptly made, and encourage retail stores to police the accuracy of their check-out scanners.

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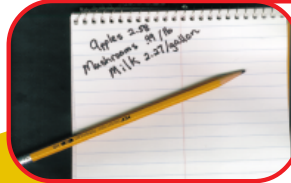
A Consumer's Guide to Accurate Scanned Pricing

and the National Conference on
Weights and Measures,
courtesy of the Pennsylvania
Department of Agriculture.

What To Look For

Learn How to be a Smart Consumer

Without price tags, consumers can still spot pricing errors at the register.



Consider jotting down prices or special sales as you shop a store. In grocery stores, you may want to use a pen, pencil, or marker to note the product prices on the package.



Bring a copy of the store's flyer or newspaper ad with you. Some advertised specials, such as 25 percent off an item for a special sale or a two-for-one promotion, may not be in the computer, and the cashier must enter them manually.



Watch the display screen as prices appear. If you think you were overcharged, speak up. Ask about the store's policy on pricing errors or if they have a scanner guarantee. Ask the cashier to make any adjustment before you pay. Some stores simply adjust the price; others deduct an additional amount or offer the mispriced items for free.



Check your receipt before you leave the store. If you've already left the cashier's lane, speak to the store or department manager or the customer service representative to correct any mistakes. If the store does have a scanner guarantee policy, ask the cashier to apply it.

Pricing Accuracy Concerns

Electronic scanning is not foolproof. Overcharging and undercharging typically result from human error, poor pricing practices, and mismanagement. It can also be fraud. As a result, consumer advocates and regulators are concerned about several things: inconsistencies between the advertised or posted prices and the prices stored in the computer; inaccurate prices throughout a chain of stores because of errors in the central computer; and problems for shoppers who may not remember posted prices of special promotions when they check out.

Effective Complaining/Laws and State Enforcement

Promising one price and charging a higher price is against the law. If you are overcharged in a particular store, tell the clerk or talk to the customer service representative or store manager about it. If errors occur frequently, write to the company's headquarters. The retailer may not realize a problem exists until it is formally pointed out.

You should report repetitive overcharges to your state or county weights and measures department. They have responsibility of oversight of the law.

If you have a problem with a weights or measures issue, talk with the store manager or owner. If the manager can't or won't resolve the problem or answer questions to your satisfaction, contact your state or local weights and measures office. They will investigate your complaint.